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ABSTRACT

Students do not need to be told that they are socially constituted so much as they need to experience, in concrete terms, what that means. In an era of identity politics, they need to experience the labels they choose (or the labels chosen for them) as no less problematic than they are inevitable. A means to this end is a classroom heuristic tried in venues as various as ESL classes and graduate seminars. Participants address a label they have been given or a type with which they have been identified, ideally one that allows them to address an important issue in their lives. Many choose cultural or social identifications, but there is no label or type that is not a social construction. In one class, an Indian American student ran into difficulties examining her label as "Indian," difficulties that are typical in this type of exercise: namely, the difficulty of saying what the label is and what it is not. When participants share their different examinations of a label, a number of conclusions follow: (1) that any label or role is inadequate; (2) the need to distinguish one label or type from others problematizes notions of what is "normal"; and (3) a multiplicity of labels exists in any individual case. Further benefits of this exercise are that it explodes the notion that people in the mainstream, unlike the dispossessed, have the privilege of defining themselves; and that it complicates theories about social constitution that do not give adequate consideration to agency. (TB)

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Writing Subjects Enacting the Writing Subject's Complexity

I'll begin with a conceptual overview, overstated according to conventions obtaining in talks like this, but no less useful for that--all the more useful, in fact, if the overstatements prove irritants of thought.

So here goes. The shift from the process paradigm to the social-theoretic seems so complete these days that it elides certain areas of inquiry, now become presuppositions. The postmodern focus on the social determination and location of agency makes for a too-easy dismissal of authorial will and distinctiveness. The result is sometimes to deny not just the possibility of individual power but even the possibility of empowerment (a suspect word in any case), sometimes to define empowerment (whatever that is) strictly in terms of acculturation to the academic community (as if there were just one), sometimes to restrict that empowerment to collective action rooted in some discourse community outside academia (because, for students, the only bona fide discourse communities presumably exist outside). Conflicts ensue--always have--but instead of watching Don Stewart, proponent of "authentic voice," have at Ken Bruffee as a proponent of social constructionism, we now watch Min-Zhan Lu have at Bruffee as an opponent of "any sign of heterogeneity, uncertainty, or instability." Radical becomes retrograde, all in the space of half a decade. Many hold with Michael Holzman that

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"'the truth of education' is to be found in a rejection of specialization and outside authority," while scholar after scholar recounts the truism that the writing subject is socially (over)determined.

Where does this leave the student of writing? The question of social location makes this no mere figurative query, while the question of agency forces us to wonder what role, if any, students can have in situating themselves. Teachers may trade one form of manipulation for another, proclaiming the classroom its own "meaningful discourse community" a la Jay Robinson, or asking students to focus writing on outside allegiances or affiliations they might not yet have or might already be moving beyond. Either way, one begins with presumptions about (even predigested analyses of) the writing students' complex social constitutions. With the social nature of the writing subject not just overdetermined but overdiscussed, what is needed is not further abstract discussion but some concrete, individualized yet collective enactment. Writing students need an experience of themselves revealing in social and psychological terms what Susan Miller has shown in textual terms: that the writing subject is "simultaneously always derivative and always original." They don't need to be told that they are socially constituted so much as they need to experience, in concrete terms, what that means. In an era of identity politics, they need to experience the labels they choose (cr the labels chosen for them) as no less problematic than they are inevitable.

A means to this end is a classroom heuristic tried in venues

as various as ESL classes and graduate seminars, standard freshman English and even faculty development workshops on cultural diversity. Participants address a label they have been given or a type with which they have been identified, ideally one that allows them to address an important issue in their lives. Many choose cultural or social identifications, but there is no label or type that is not a social construction. Participants must agree to go public, so that those who may write about being, say, alcoholics anorexics or gays must know that they are breaking anonymity, outing themselves. Beyond this, the only stricture is that the label or type must be addressed from the outside in as well as the inside out: participants need to note perceptions and misperceptions (if time permits with the help of interviews and the like) as well as register the dynamics of their own relation to the label or type (conflicts with other identifications, changes over time, etc.).

So that I myself don't stay unremittingly abstract, I want to focus on a single example of how this works out, an example representative even though it seems extreme--an overdramatized or exoticized playing out of what I have come to see as a typical pattern. Part of my point is that, however unusual or distinctive this particular case may seem, the difficulties and discoveries the student met with corrrespond to those of supposedly "normal" students--and to the discoveries and difficulties you yourself would have if you were to work through this exercise.

In an intro-to-college-writing class I had awhile back, no

less than seven of the students (one third of the class) came from the Indian subcontinent. This is kind of a fluke thing, admittedly, but less of an anomaly at my campus--where so-called "minority" (and even "language minority") students predominate--than it might be at others. What's more, six of these seven students were female. When given the assignment I just outlined--that of addressing a label or a type with which they have been identified, (ideally, again, one allowing them to treat a significant personal issue)--only one of these six chose to write about being an Indian student. (Among the others, one who just entered the world of work-for-pay wrote about being a "working woman"; another, a volleyball player on scholarship, wrote about being perceived as a "jock"; yet another, coming from ESL instruction, wrote about being classed as limited-English-proficient; the remaining two labeled themselves according to their tentative majors--accounting and theater.)

What was interesting--but, again, by no means atypical--is that the one "Indian" student who chose to discuss herself in terms of that label had serious difficulty claiming that label (something the presence--and peer review work--of the other Indian students no doubt had something to do with). (I should say at this point that one reason I can make generalizations like this is that, in this instance, the labeling exercise played out to the length of a full semester, including, in addition to journal keeping and interviews, three formal assignments: the initial one outlined, and an argument and a research paper on

issues turned up in that initial assignment.)

Guneet's difficulties with that initial assignment were essentially two; they were, sufficiently abstracted, the same two problems always encountered in any exercise in definition: saying what the thing defined is, and saying what it is not. The latter is no less important, really: definition is always, by definition, a sort of contradistinction. In Guneet's specific case, she chose to distinguish the "Indian" student from the "American" student, a point of contrast that came with its own problems in definition. But the term "Indian," signifying (not least of all for Guneet) a locus of still greater cultural (and other) diversity than the term "American," was a source of greater problems. It was not that Guneet was Punjabi while some of her fellow "Indians" were Bengali or Gujarati; she shared with at least one of them most of the many points of difference she had with others in the group: differences of language, of educational background, of class. But she was, in the context of this small group, unique in one respect: she was the only Sikh, subject to moral and religious strictures that made the others regard her as atypical. One in particular, Priya--who shared the same language, class, and state affiliations as Guneet as well as the same general educational background--was insistent about Guneet's inability to speak of what it meant to be "Indian." One way Guneet addressed Priya's objections involved violating Sikh customs: she interviewed male as well as female Indian students, though she was supposed to have no unsupervised contact with the

opposite sex.

Subsequent assignments disclosed other complications (and other motivations) in Guneet's exploration of the label "Indian." Among other things, she had a bone to pick with Richard Rodriguez. Since reading from Hunger of Memory, she had wanted to counter his argument that public gain meant private loss, that the home culture had to be left behind. For Guneet, the problem of assimiliation was that Indian natives in America assimilated too easily (though never completely); she wanted to argue against relinquishing any identifications with the home culture.

But, as the research paper revealed, there were tensions on Guneet's home cultural front. Her parents (her mother, really) had begun talking to her in earnest about the prospect of an arranged marriage, and at the time when Guneet's goals for a career in law--requiring egregious overeducation in her mother's view--were taking shape. Earlier in the term, Guneet had been one of four women in the class presenting a dramatization of a chapter from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Women and Economics--and she had chosen to incarnate the view of women as essentially breeders and nurturers, a view Gilman insisted society must move beyond. Now Gilman, this feminist from the turn of another century, became an important voice in the paper, an ally in Guneet's quest for self-determination. But the paper reached the conclusion that she would, for the time being, resolve to accede to her parent's wishes--partly because of the serious consequences of disobeying them, partly because self-examination

had convinced her that the roles of wife and mother were more important to her, she decided, than her career goals.

Now I'll pull back from the specific case of Guneet to the general results of exercises like the one she went through. As I do, I invite you to think of a label applicable to you. A moment's thought should be all it will take to start to sketch in the outlines of the same pattern emerging in Guneet's case--and the cases of all her other classmates, cases no less rich in their particularity. Collective pooling of results for this exercise tends to the same conclusions, regardless of the venue. I'll give them more schematically than they emerge in the discussions, of course. I'll also use Guneet's case to exemplify each while hoping you'll provide your own personal instances.

1) The overarching conclusion: any type or label or role is inadequate to define the writing subject--as a reduction, a misperception, a poor fit, etc. (Was Guneet Indian enough? Too Indian? As opposed to what? Other Indians? Like whom? If she didn't seem wholly representative of the type she was treating, nor it of her, of whom would this not be true?)

2) The need to distinguish as specific type from some generality--to distinguish the "Indian" student from the "American" in the American context, for instance--problematizes notions of what's "normal." Americans had taught Guneet to think of herself as a person of color, but the only whites in her class were Eastern Europeans. She herself noted that the closest analogue to her situation was

that of a West Inidan black who, in her papers, was focusing on tensions she was experiencing between Caribbiean and US-born blacks.

3) An obvious corollary is that a multiplicity of labels exists in any individual case, often in ways that create tensions. (In Guneet's case, for instance--and, in different ways, in those of all the other female Indian students, gender roles created crucial tensions in the roles they were treating.)

4) The label may have its own tension of acceptance/resistance: rarely wholly a source of pride or shame, it can seem both imposed and central to one's identity, an embraced identification and a cause of discrimination. (In her first paper, Guneet wrote of discrimination she experienced, her sense of being singled out and excluded, but also of her pride in wearing her distinctive costume to the American high school where the discimination she recounted took place.)

5) The position of the individual with respect to a label tends to be in a state of flux: in addition to moving toward or away from an identification, the individual may participate in larger social changes in perception like so-called generation gaps--as Guneet, pondering and resisting cultural assimilation, felt the pull of career goals never contemplated by her mother.

6) All of these conclusions problematize rather than resolve questions of social location and agency, so conclusions beyond the preceding--the conclusions students are really

> interested in arriving at--are anything but conclusive, better left as questions rather than conclusions. Who imposes the label? How is it constructed? Whose perceptions are represented? Whose discounted? Are there competing understandings of the label? Can labels be escaped or redefined--and if so, how? (The case of Guneet seems an especially dramatic enactment of such questions, partly because of tensions with sharers of her label, above all since the decision she eventually reached--that of placing wife-and-motherhood first--was one that she could neither entirely own nor disown, could neither see as final nor infinitely postponable. The situations she considered were experienced as problems that did not admit of easy solutions--precisely because she also experienced the complexity of the roles she had to play in those situations.)

In addition to those questions just posed, there is of course one last great question for students and teachers--Where does one go from here? That the "here" here is not a foregone conclusion, that the student has explored the "situation" of the student, that the question about where to go from "situation" can seem rich in possibilities--this underscores the utility of the exercise as a starting point in writing instruction. That some conclusions come to have already been reached by compositionists (if only in very general terms) is part of the point: if acceptance of such conclusions (not a collective, experiential

discovery) is the starting point, their concrete verification is circumvented. Thoughts about how to organize writing or instructional activities take the form of a pre-emptive strike on the students' thoughts about where to go from such a point of departure. That need not be the case.

An important side-benefit should be mentioned. No one would deny that most of the work on writing as social location and social action has focused primarily on the dispossessed and oppressed, those outside the mainstream rather than in it. Few would deny that this should be the primary focus. But a consequence for classroom teaching may well be the inadvertent suggestion that the mainstream is thus the locus of the natural, normal, self-determined. Exploding such complacency, the classroom heuristic discussed here by no means spotlights the marginal student or the marked difference (like currently popular exercises in cultural autobiography). I may seem to have done this, but my point is that Guneet, however exotic her case seems, is in fact typical--that I could have made the same point about exploring the writing subject's social constitution by getting up here and waxing autobiographical. I stand before you as yet another not-yet-dead white male, but the great test for me each time this exercise comes up--since I do it too--is whether to treat one not especially public nor wholly private role of mine, one associated with socially stigmatized and even criminalized behaviors. Whether I treat it or not, I have to acknowledge that what makes me truly typical (at least in the sense I've

adumbrated here) is that I have aspects that seem radically atypical from presumably typical perspectives. I'm not easily pegged--and that thought, far from making me smug, is potentially disturbing and disruptive.

Of course, like anyone else who works through the exercise, I have safer but no less viable labels to explore and so don't have to experience real discomfiture to enact the point that I'm not easily summed up. No one is. But the compelling reasons why are in the details that make the truism true in each case, the myriad identifications with others combining to make each of us sui generis. The exercise outlined invites every individual to experience and explore the reality of being socially constituted --but also of being distinctively individual, not as an autonomous ego but as a unique configuration of responses to social forces. My sense, supported by some transpersonal experience, is that registering one's own irreducible social complexity produces, not just a heightened awareness of the social complications of agency, but a real unwillingness to label and sum up others. We are what we know ourselves to be--and that is a tautology only if we are simple and static in our being and knowing. Enriched self-appraisals should make us less reductive about others. We should know better.